

## Elaborate Courtesy in West Arabia

NASIR M. AL-JEHANI

*Assistant Professor, English Language Department, Faculty of Social Sciences  
Ummal-Qura University, Mecca – Saudi Arabia*

**ABSTRACT.** The elaborate verbal expression of courtesy in West Arabia is a potentially problematic communicative behavior in cross-cultural communication. In an effort to contribute to the elimination of such problems in such a context, an explanation of this behavior from within the culture was provided. The culture of West Arabia being characterized as a collective, contact, and polychronic-time culture; placing an extensive value on people and their relationships was found to provide the underlying pattern for this communicative behavior. Elaborate verbal courtesy in West Arabia was found to be only a reflection of the rules, norms, and values of the West Arabian culture.

### 1. Introduction

The expansion of worldwide communication networks and the development of sophisticated means of transportation came as a result of and contributed to the ever increasing interdependence between the different political, economic, and social entities in the world today. This interdependence has led people with different cultural backgrounds to be in constant contact with each other. The inevitable result of this cross-cultural contact is cross-cultural communication; and whenever this type of communication takes place, there is always the potential for problems to occur.

Intercultural communication occurs when two or more individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact. This process is rarely smooth and problem free.

(Andersen 1988: 272)

Cross-cultural communication problems arise from differences in the social values, logic patterns, attitudes, and approaches to life; in short, cultures, of the participants in the communication process. The reduction of these problems, and, consequently, the ability to communicate effectively, can be only achieved via an understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of these differences (Gudykunst and Kim 1984). Only then can we develop interpersonal relationships and carry on successful political negotiations, diplomatic tasks, and business deals.

Arabs as a cultural group, have their own cultural patterns; and these patterns are in many respects different from the patterns of other cultural groups. As such, communication between Arabs and people from other cultures is potentially problematic.

The difference between Western and Arab logic patterns suggests that there is a significant potential for major intercultural communication problems to occur.

(Lustig 1988: 103)

Communication patterns are not equally problematic. The more a pattern is culture specific, the more problematic it comes to be in cross-cultural communication. Peculiar to Arabs is their extreme consciousness of 'manners' and 'politeness' (Yousef 1974; Omar 1975). Compared to Westerners, Arabs extremely elaborate on their expressions of courtesy. Greetings, requests, thanks, and other courtesy expressions are so much elaborated on. About the introduction ritual in Saudi Arabia, Lustig (1988: 103) says:

A communication pattern that frequently occurs in Saudi Arabia interactions is the elaborate and extended introduction ritual that is characterized by excessive politeness and attention to social etiquette. Handshakes often extend for several minutes, and a very stylized exchange of polite questions and blessings can continue almost indefinitely.

It is this aspect of the interpersonal dimension; namely, the elaboration of courtesy expressions, that we intend to examine in this paper. To be specific, it is elaboration of verbal *courtesy*. Our objective is to highlight this aspect, describe it, and most importantly, provide an explanation for it within a cultural framework; relying on both personal observation and collected data.

The locale of the research is confined to West Arabia, the area called Hijaz in Saudi Arabia. Observation and collected data were basically from the four major cities in West Arabia, namely, the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and the cities of Jedda and Taif. Variations in the expression of courtesy within and between the four cities are not ruled out, but are rather, maintained to exist. However, the pattern is a prevailing one, and generally holding. It is from this perspective that we will consider the issue. We also believe that although the issue and the discussion of it is confined to West Arabia, the pattern is, more or less, the same throughout Saudi Arabia, in particular, and the Arab world, in general.

This study has a number of contributions: First, it will contribute to the recognition of the fundamental peculiarities and universalities of communication in the different cultures, and consequently to the theory of communication. Second, the study will highlight assumptions about similar behavior in other cultures for communication specialists and anthropological linguists. Third, and most importantly, the study will explain to people from other cultures how we express ourselves and interpret the

world the way we do and why. Our behavior, then, will be less confusing and more interpretable to others.

Understanding about intercultural differences ... is bound to reduce ethnocentrism and make strangers from other cultures seem less threatening. Fear is often based on ignorance and misunderstanding. The fact of intercultural diversity should produce joy and optimism about the number of possible ways to be human.

(Andersen 1988: 280)

## 2. Verbal Courtesy in West Arabia

Amiable or benevolent treatment is among the rudiments of social life in all cultures. Courtesy is expressed, in one way or another, in each and every society in the world (Ferguson 1976). The constituency and intensity of courtesy expressions vary according to a number of social factors such as the relative social status of the participants in the communication process; solidarity of the relationship; and the time elapsed since their last encounter. This is the same in all cultures (ibid.). What is not the same is that in the same social situation, the constituency and intensity of courtesy expressions are different in different cultures; in some they are more elaborate than in the others.

Our observation and examination of the collected data show that the expression of courtesy in the interactions of West Arabians, compared to Westerners, is extremely elaborate. Greetings are characterized by the use of so many courtesy expressions: "Peace be on you", "Good morning", "How are you?", "What are the news?", "Hope you are all right?", "Welcome", "May God greet you", "May God bless you", "How are the kids?", "God willing they are all right?", "May God welcome you", "All of you are O.K.?", "How is the father and the mother?", "How are the brothers?". Some of these expressions may be repeated over and over again. Repetition might be of the same expression or a variable of it: "How are the kids?" ... "The kids are all right?". Moreover, people sometimes greet, indulge in talk about something, and then greet again:

- A – (Greeting)
- B – (Greeting)
- A – How is X ?
- B – He is fine.
- a – Is he still in Jedda ?
- b – No, he moved to Dhahran.
- a – Why ?
- b – ...
- a – ...
- b – ...
- A – May God greet you.
- B – May God give you a long life.
- A – Welcome.
- B – ...
- A – ...

Courtesy expressions are also elaborate in requests. People are not normally satisfied with "Please" or "If you please" only. You start the request with some courtesy expressions, and, after it is approved by the requested, you state some more of these expressions, or repeat some of those you stated at the beginning. These are such as "Is it possible", "If you please", "If you permit", "Hopefully", "Can you do me a favor?", "A favor, not an order", "May God keep you", "May God not put you down", "We want to burden you", "We want to trouble you" and "Long live you".

Fulfilling requests and doing favors are normally appreciated. Appreciation is expressed by thanks; and these, too, are elaborately expressed in West Arabia. A mere "Thank you" is considered not polite enough. It leaves the doer of the favor with the impression that he/she had to do that 'favor' for you. Elaboration of thanks in the form of stating more of the expressions of thanking and appreciation is normally due if one wants to show true appreciation of the favor; the more you appreciate, the more you thank. Phrases of thanking and appreciation include: "Thank you", "May you be safe", "Favor doer", "We have burdened you", "We have troubled you", "We are unable to thank you", "May God honor you", "May God bless you", "May God make you last", "May God make you succeed", "May God make it easy for you", "May God increase your goodness", "May God not deprive us of you".

Unlike greetings; requests and thanks are in a disproportional relationship with the degree of intimacy and closeness between the ones involved. The more you are close and intimate to the other, the less the extent to which you express your requests and thanks; and the vice versa.

The extent to which verbal courtesy expressions are elaborate in West Arabia is not only observed in specific social situations, but is also evident throughout speech. There are so many things that when mentioned one needs to provide a specific courtesy expression before or after they are mentioned. The number of such contexts is enormous. In mentioning shoes, toilets, animals, and the like, one is supposed to say "No offense" or "May God honor you". When one supposes something bad to happen, one is supposed to say "God forbid", "May God not permit it" or "[May it be] Outside and distant". And when a bad incident that happened in the past is mentioned, one is supposed to say "May God forbid evil back". When one says that something broke, fell, thrown, destroyed, ... etc., or when someone bad is mentioned, or that something bad happened to someone, the speaker is supposed to say "(The) Far and away". Addressing a specific person by name among a group requires you to indicate that you are not ignoring the others by saying, "Talk is (addressed) to all" or "The others are not to be put down". To inform someone that the information he/she has about something is not correct and that the truth of the matter is so and so, one is supposed to introduce his statements with "(And) You are true". To show that you are not envious to your addressee or addresser and that you like good for him when you see or hear or talk about something good that belongs or happens to him, you are supposed to say, "In the name of God", "What God wills" or "God bless" or you can say them all together. To mention someone who is away or traveling, one

says, "May God have him remembered with goodness", and to mention a dead person, one says, "May God have mercy on him".

Other courtesy contexts do exist; and the repertoire of West Arabians include so many other verbal expressions of courtesy. The material cited, however, seems to be sufficient to illustrate how elaborate the verbal expression of courtesy is in the interaction of West Arabians.

### 3. West Arabians Elaborate Expression of Courtesy and the West Arabian Culture

Communication and culture are so closely intertwined to the extent that some scholars have equated culture with communication (Andersen 1988). It is through communication that culture is learned, maintained, developed, and transmitted from one generation to the other. As well, our communication patterns are shaped by the rules and norms of our culture.

... we communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules and norms.

(Gudykunst and Kim 1984: 4)

As such, elaboration on the verbal expression of courtesy in West Arabia must be a product of the West Arabian culture. It must be the culture, that is, that dictates on the people of West Arabia to be elaborate on their verbal expression of courtesy.

Several dimensions of cultural variation are argued to produce differences in a culture's communication patterns (Andersen 1988). The cultural characteristics of West Arabia categorize it, among other things, as a collective culture. Collective cultures – as opposed to individualistic cultures – are those characterized by the interdependence of its people. In collective cultures people rely on each other and have a strong sense of the group. They place a great value on family devotion, group harmony, community allegiance, and social cohesion. Personal interests are suppressed if they contradict those of the group. Group norms are sacred; and relationships are deep, respected, and extensively developed (Andersen 1988).

People in West Arabia are very much interdependent and group-oriented. Conservatism, family devotion, group harmony, other-orientedness, and traditionalism are among the most relevant cultural values of Saudi Arabians (Lustig 1988). People do care for and rely on each other. You are never alone; consequently, you must always care for others, consider their needs, emotions, attitudes, happiness, and satisfaction; and suppress personal interests in favor of those of the group. Individual needs are in the most part subordinated to those of the family and close relatives (Lustig 1988). Group norms are so much respected that one would not dare violate them.

The cultural characteristics of West Arabia also classify it as a contact culture. Contact cultures – as opposed to low-contact cultures – are those characterized by

immediacy behaviors. These are:

... actions that simultaneously communicate warmth, closeness, and availability for communication; they signal approach rather than avoidance and closeness rather than distance.

(Andersen 1988: 274)

Examples of immediacy behaviors include smiling, touching, eye contact, and close distance. In contact cultures, people smile more often, touch more often, have longer eye contacts, and stand closer to each other; in short, show considerable interpersonal closeness than people in low-contact cultures (Hall 1981).

People in West Arabia act in a way that reflects 'warmth', 'closeness', 'availability for communication' and 'approach'.

In social conversations, Saudi Arabians stand slightly closer to one another than Americans do. They gesture frequently and often touch one another while talking. Both the speaker and the listener engage in mutual eye gaze almost continuously.

(Lustig 1988: 103).

West Arabians sit, stand, walk, and talk in close proximity to each other. They touch each other very frequently while talking, and some hold each other's hands in walking in the streets and malls. In West Arabia facing your interlocutor and looking at him while talking to you are among the requirements of polite listening that people normally adhere to.

West Arabia is also culturally characterized as a polychronic-time culture. Polychronic-time cultures – as opposed to monochronic-time cultures – are those in which time is less tangible and the notion of being 'on time' is comparatively loose. In such cultures, people are involved in several things at once; schedules do not form an integral part of their system; appointments are not seriously taken and, consequently, are normally broken; interruptions are routines and delays represent the norm rather than the exception (Hall 1984).

Polychronic-time cultures are people-oriented. Relationships with people in these cultures are extremely important. People are so much involved in others that this involvement comes to be "... the very core of their existence" (Hall 1984: 50). They are in constant contact with each other, having so many relations and simultaneous interactions that they cannot keep up with schedules and appointments. People and relationships are so important that they take precedence over schedules and appointments.

If you value people, you must hear them out and can not cut them off simply because of a schedule.

(Hall 1984: 53).

Compared to that of the Western world, West Arabians consideration of time is extremely loose. An exact hour, not an approximation, for an appointment is only occasionally given, and only very few people stick to their appointments. Excuses for being late, if given, are normally not good ones; and people are normally annoyed if you question their impromptness. The large majority of people are not used to plans and schedules; and paperwork, bureaucratic procedures, and transactions are much slower than they normally are in the Western world.

As a polychronic-time culture, West Arabians are very much people-oriented. People are extremely important in this culture that one, in one way or another, is always involved with others. To West Arabians, nothing has a value if people are not involved; and life becomes worthless if no one is around. A very popular saying in West Arabia reads, "A paradise without people is not stepped into". Hall (1982: 158) says;

... Arabs are deeply involved with each other. Their personalities are intermingled and take nourishment from each other like the roots and soil. If one is not with people and involved in some way, one is deprived of life.

The culture of West Arabia, then, is a culture that highly values mutual solidarity, and harmony and cohesion between people; a culture that highly emphasizes closeness, approach, and availability to people; and a culture that highly stresses involvement and constant being with people. These rules, norms, and values of the culture govern and shape the social behavior of West Arabians. As a form of social behavior, the communicative behavior of West Arabians is also shaped by these cultural rules, norms, and values. People are instructed by the culture to be elaborately courteous in every aspect of their behavior, including communicative behavior. The communicative pattern of expressing courtesy elaborately, then, is a pattern dictated by the culture. A culture that values people and their relationships extensively requires courtesy to be expressed elaborately.

The elaborate verbal expression of courtesy in West Arabia, therefore, is a reflection of the values of the culture. It springs from within the culture, as a reflection of its values, and in conjunction with its norms. It is a culture-shaped verbal behavior; structured and governed by the rules of the culture.

### **Conclusion**

Elaboration on the verbal expression of courtesy in West Arabia is the theme of this paper. It is a potentially-problematic communicative pattern in cross-cultural communication as it is different from the patterns of verbal courtesy expression in many cultures; especially Western ones. We tried in this paper to provide an explanation for this pattern from a cultural perspective in an effort to contribute to the elimination of potential misunderstanding and consequent problems that might arise in cross-cultural communication. A pattern 'admirable' in a culture, might be 'a minefield' for people from another culture "... not familiar with the insecurities un-

derlying it and the diverse circumstances in which it can be invoked" (Murray 1988: 99).

Elaboration on the verbal expression of courtesy in West Arabia was found to be a reflection of the extensive value placed on people and their relationships in the culture of West Arabia. The verbal expression of courtesy was found to be patterned and governed by the norms and values of the culture.

A word of caution, however, is due here. Our observation and data indicate that the pattern of verbal expression of courtesy in West Arabia is changing. We noticed systematic variation between old and young generations; with the old being much more elaborate in their expression of courtesy than the young. This observation is supported by a number of indicators that direct our thought towards this conclusion; for example, the increase in space between new structures, e.g. houses, streets, compared to old ones; and the decrease in the amount of time people spend with each other and their contact and involvement with each other, compared to that of the past. Lustig (1988: 103) says:

One must be cautious in accepting any firm conclusions about Saudi Arabia, however, as rapid societal changes and economic forces are having a major influence in the country ... Nevertheless, despite the Saudis' exposure to modern political and social trends, social customs continue to be tempered by traditional Saudi Arabian values.

Finally, attention must be drawn to the fact that there are many other aspects in the communication patterns of West Arabians that are culture-specific and, consequently, problematic in cross-cultural interaction. As well, since culture is a whole and since there are many other views and approaches, analyses are almost always short from complete.

The identification of common problem areas in communication across cultures is always incomplete; there are always other interpretations and, since culture is a whole, the selection of 'factors' or 'themes' is never completely shown in its entire context. Nevertheless, a common effort to appreciate differences across cultures is essential.

(Condon 1988: 115)

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## المجاملة المسهبة في غرب الجزيرة العربية

ناصر محمد الجهني

أستاذ مساعد ، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية ، كلية العلوم الاجتماعية  
جامعة أم القرى - مكة - المملكة العربية السعودية

**المستخلص :** تتسبب الخصوصيات التخاطبية التي تتميز بها بعض الأمم أو الحضارات في اشكاليات تقع أحيانا عند مخاطب أبناء تلك الأمم أو الحضارات مع أناس آخرين . ومن الخصوصيات التخاطبية لأبناء غرب الجزيرة العربية - منطقة الحجاز - والتي قد تسبب اشكاليات عند التخاطب عبر الحضارات هي الإسهاب في المجاملة الكلامية - التحية ، الشكر ، الطلب . . . الخ . وفي محاولة للإسهام في إزالة الاشكاليات المحتملة لهذا التصرف التخاطبي الذي تتسم به هذه الحضارة ، فقد قدمنا تفسيراً لذلك التصرف من واقع الحضارة نفسها .

تتسم حضارة غرب الجزيرة العربية بأنها حضارة جماعية ، تواصلية ، تعددية الزمن - أي إن الزمن والموايد في هذه الحضارة تحتل المرتبة الثانية من حيث الأهمية ، وذلك بعد العلاقات الاجتماعية ، بعكس الحضارة الغربية والتي تتصف بأنها فردية ، أقل تواصلية ، أحادية الزمن . وهذه السمات الأنثروبولوجية لحضارة غرب الجزيرة العربية تعني أنها حضارة تضع أهمية كبيرة للعلاقات الاجتماعية ، بالتالي فإن الإسهاب في المجاملة ما هو إلا تصرف تخاطبي يعكس تلك الأهمية للعلاقات الاجتماعية في هذه الحضارة . أي إن الإسهاب في المجاملة ليس إلا انعكاس لقوانين وأعراف وقيم حضارة غرب الجزيرة العربية .